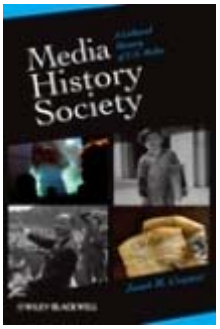
Media Studies: Media, History, Society & Thinking Popular Culture

Posted on Sunday, June 28 @ 01:06:02 EST by tim milfull



Reviewed by Lee Duffield

When cultural life is re-defined as a perpetual round of entertainments, when serious public conversation becomes a form of baby talk, when, in short, a people become an audience and their public business a vaudeville act, then a nation finds itself at risk.

The dire tones of Postman quoted in Janet Cramer's *Media, History, Society: A Cultural History of US Media* introduce one view that she canvasses, in the debate of the moment, as to where popular culture is heading in the digital age. This is canvassed, less systematically, in *Thinking Popular Culture: War Terrorism and Writing* by Tara Brabazon, who for example refers to concerns about a "crisis of critical language" that is bothering professionals—journalists and academics or elsewhere—and deplores the advent of the Internet, as a "flattening of expertise in digital environments".

The approach of the first of these books, as the title implies, is historical.

Cramer provides an extremely concise and yet exhaustive treatment of the development of American mass media, dealing mainly with journalism, in its relations with government, business and community. This is an American university text, making sure that a large range of information is covered, and references properly sheeted home, while the base premise of the book—that historical study is valuable for explanation—is argued in the Introduction.

A summary at the end of each chapter—"what you have learned"—offers a loose treatment of the verb "to learn", but in each case gives a neat statement of ideas and information to which we have been exposed, and provides a marker for the particular stage in the book's chronological development of its subject.

This book should be useful for researchers in the media or journalism fields, as a reminder of main phases in the evolution of mass media; for the adept way it ties the story together, and also for the particular depth and interest value of some of the sections. For example, it deals extensively with the impact on free speech of the United States First Amendment, and also with the importance of war, and war regulation, in the evolution of mass media, free or otherwise. Unfortunately it is by the same token too much sited in America to be used in Australian universities for its primary purpose, as the set handbook for an undergraduate subject.

Cramer's text can be confidently put on the recommended list, however, for its general erudition, wealth of resources in terms of the historical treatments of several themes, and the universal relevance of many of its messages. For instance it begins with a short discussion on how media may shape society, and society may shape media. For instance also, it traces the roots of present-day debates over pornography and hate speech to precedents in the nineteenth-century; or tells the tales of the emergence of industralised media and the "penny press", translating that through to an explanation of our contemporary, market-driven news

machines.

Cramer is giving an overview and wants to mention, not subscribe to any particular paradigms, and so, as in this case of the penny press, the author reports on, yet does not subscribe to either “great man” or “technological determinism” treatments of the phenomenon of the early entrepreneurial newspapers. This book is then, a demonstration of the liberal way of gaining understanding, to attempt to consider the range of events and possibilities, and work in a systematic way to find conclusions. The book, when it runs out of history by arriving at the twenty-first century, does, as its general Conclusion, offer an essay on the impacts of digitisation, which puts currently received wisdom into good order.

Cramer proposes that by dint of the proliferation of information and opinion exchange on the Internet, and heavy use of its many services as a source of news, that new media are empowering for individual citizens. She considers a shift away from understanding mass media and journalism as a social institution, to ways of seeing it in terms of citizens’ use of media—which has become far better comprehended in recent years—thanks to mass participation in open dialogue, and so thanks to assumed very high media literacy.

Cramer’s book is clearly written, highly readable, and of course does the reader the honour of both providing good evidence for all propositions made, and making out a sequential and clear argument.

Brabazon’s work, from a different tradition of cultural studies, wants to consider the new media-saturated world from popular perspectives, leaving out any account of institutional life—except for autobiographical sections about the author’s own twenty-year career in university departments. She does offer a view of things that Cramer could well deliver though generally does not; as when, explaining films in terms of technology and the better ability of workers to pay to see them, her narrative also proposes that films became “a revolutionary force in a consumer’s ability to imagine for oneself a better world … a powerful window in to people’s mental and emotional needs, and, most important … a venue in which to satisfy those needs.”

Thinking Popular Culture does promise an argument, as in its sub-title, “war, terrorism and writing”. Its strength, however, is more in its conversational approach: the array of subject matter—rock music, handbags, watching TV—drawn from the repertoire of popular culture, and sections of catchy prose, offering to sort out the confusing thoughts brought on by the inundation of media messages.

This reviewer places a value on that, having shown the book to mostly-younger acquaintances in their twenties and thirties, to find some of them asking to borrow it later—thinking it might be cool to dip into it and see what all this terrorism and writing might be about. They will not actually be able to obtain an explanation, but will find the reading easy and engaging enough. A moment of the “catchy prose” comes together with the introduction of the terrorism theme:

The last decade has generated two magnetic poles that have pulled cultural and political forces towards them: September 11 and Google.

The premise of the book is that the following chapters, a collection of short first-person essays, or magazine-type feature articles on music, have disruptive terrorism or tragedy in the background; hence an inconclusive chapter called “Coalition of the Guilty” that covers the shock of seeing the 1994 tsunami on television, and deplores the use of short descriptive terms as catchphrases on television: “regime change”; “Pacific solution”; “evil doers”.

At another point, the outlines of an argument are sketched out about perceived developments in the Cultural Studies discipline in universities; that leaders in that field have come under polemical attack, and have moved to other areas, while the Google search engine is displacing cultural studies thought, through producing a “ruthless ranking of popularity.”

Here and there, Brabazon labels reading books as a precious occupation, and proposes to make a case for more traditional thought:

We used to have librarians. Now we have information managers and resource centre administrators. The dark urgency of our age is that at this very point where we need leadership from librarians and teachers to negotiate our way through an information thick - rather than rich - age, managerial and administrative decisions change our designations, function and purpose.

Elsewhere there is talk of social engagement through scholarship, with anxiety over whether “radical and disruptive humanities research” is to survive. Yet in none of these cases do you find a follow-through of the proffered polemics; the foreshadowed argument is not delivered in the book. It is non-empirical, raising many undefended assumptions and claims (e.g. that a certain orientalist discourse exoticises, romanticises and objectifies the “East”).

As well, *Thinking Popular Culture*, unsurprisingly, is ahistorical, as much as *Media History Society* by contrast uses historical treatments. Its literary references, of course, tend to be all recent, though there is a quotation showing appreciation of George Orwell appreciating Charles Dickens, (drawn from when we used to have a literary canon, perhaps). Likewise the rock music pieces that make up much of the book, especially the later chapters, refer back to music of the 1960s—though not in a social context.

Writing these would seem to be the author’s actual passion; themes are, the Byrds’ arrangement of “Mr Tambourine Man”, one musician’s very creative guitar playing, excellence of the 1980s group Pet Shop Boys, or the importance of Bob Dylan. Brabazon actually may have been toying with an idea for an argument that rock music used to be part of radicalisation in society—cultural activism in politics—with a chapter called “Stop crying, start thinking: putting the punch back into pop”:

Paris Hilton went to prison, cried, was released from prison, cried, went back to prison, cried … Britney Speaks and Amy Winehouse have transformed rehab into a revolving door, living car crash lives of smeared eye liner, drugs, big hair, no hair, marriage, divorce, and challenges with underwear. Much of the post-1945 era featured bad boys like the Rat Pack and the Brat Pack. Now the bad girls have taken over the tabloidised sex, drugs and fast cars…

Thinking Popular Culture makes its way to a confessional ending. The media writer reports on visiting a news room, to discover there is something to be learned on the production side. Then, after studied non-engagement with its proposed themes, accompanied by much about

matters relevant to the personal concerns of the author; it declares that “the greatest social and political challenge of our time is not global warming, debt in the developing world or terrorism”, but “emotional and intellectual disconnection from any issue, topic or idea that does not have personal relevance”:

I have always believed … that the most radical decision we can make is to live in the present. I have changed my mind. After September 11, our priority is to read and remember history, to prevent the shock of world terrorism and injustice from bleaching our responsibility and respect for the differences and dissent of others.

On the evidence of the book, it will be a difficult new beginning for this reformed author, who might make a useful start by reading Janet Cramer’s short historical treatment of media and culture. Cramer’s *Thinking Popular Culture*, and Brabazon’s *Media History Society*, are each accessible to readers and valuable in their own way; the former is good scholarship, the latter is good as a blog.

Media, History, Society: A Cultural History of US Media
(2009)

by Janet M. Cramer
Wiley
ISBN: 9781405161206
296pp £22.99

Thinking Popular Culture: War Terrorism and Writing
(2008)

by Tara Brabazon
Ashgate Publishing
ISBN: 9780754675297
272pp £30.00